

# CONCLUSION

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## EVALUATION SUMMARY

Pursuant to Family Code section 15010(k), the Family Law Information Centers were evaluated for the purpose of compiling a report to the legislature. That evaluation has been completed.

The Family Law Information Center Act as cited above states that these pilot projects shall be deemed a success if

- They assist at least 100 low-income families per year;
- A majority of judges surveyed in the pilot project court believe the Family Law Information Center helps expedite cases with pro per litigants; and
- A majority of Family Law Information Center customers evaluate the Family Law Information Center favorably.

The pilot projects have clearly met these criteria for success.

## SERVICES

The Family Law Information Centers in all three counties provided services far in excess of the 100 customer per year criteria set out in the Family Code. The evaluation year was fiscal year 2001–2002, in which the programs serviced more than 45,000 people. Data indicate that the numbers of customers were comparable to the numbers served the previous fiscal year.

The volume of customers seeking services from the Family Law Information Centers was extremely large. This was particularly true in Los Angeles. The design of the program in Los Angeles was intended to address the anticipated volume and therefore provided less intensive service than was provided in the smaller two counties.

The type and character of services provided were basically similar among the counties. Assistance in cases of divorce and paternity was the most common. Assistance was also provided with Title IV-D child support enforcement and domestic violence cases. Customers came to the Family Law

Information Centers asking about an array of issues and subissues within these case types. Customers were most frequently having problems with issues related to custody/visitation and child support most frequently. Issues related to domestic violence, spousal support, and enforcement of orders were also presented to the centers.

The procedural information and guidance requested of the Family Law Information Centers included help in starting a case, responding to a case, making motions within cases for specific orders such as custody or support, accomplishing effective service of process, and completing judgments and orders after hearings. Referrals were also made to various community-based organizations for additional legal or social service help.

### **WHO USED THE FAMILY LAW INFORMATION CENTERS**

Family Law Information Centers served men and women, and petitioners and respondents. There were more women and more petitioners who requested assistance from the pilot programs.

Customers were mostly between 20 and 40 years of age, and reported having one or two children. The ethnic and language diversity of the customers roughly matched the demographic data for the pilot counties in the 2000 census.

The majority of customers reported being employed and making under \$2,000 per month. The percentage of those with incomes under \$2,000 per month was greater than that of the general population in those counties according to the 2000 census. The majority of customers also reported being at least high school graduates.

### **SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES**

Customers of the Family Law Information Centers are extremely satisfied with the services they receive. This was true across all three programs, regardless of program design.

The customers rated their interaction with Family Law Information Center staff as the most valuable aspect of the service they received. Narrative comments written by customers onto their satisfaction forms express gratitude,

admiration, and even affection for the staff. Many such comments are included in the margins of this report.

- 93% felt the service was helpful;
- 95% felt they had been treated with courtesy and respect;
- 90% got effective help with forms;
- 87% felt they understood their case better;
- 82% felt better prepared to go to court;
- 83% believed they had a better understanding of the court;
- 78% reported receiving prompt service; and
- 92% would use the center again.

About one-half of the customers had tried to find help prior to coming to the Family Law Information Center. They indicated that they had heard about the services of the Center most frequently from friends or relatives. Most indicated that they could not afford legal representation.

Asked how the centers could best improve services to them, customers most frequently asked for additional staff to answer questions and help them with their paperwork. They also often mentioned a desire for simpler forms and procedures.

### JUDGES SURVEY

Structured interviews with 24 judges from the pilot counties were conducted.

The vast majority reported that the Family Law Information Center services result in valuable time savings to the court.

- 88% reported that the Family Law Information Centers help expedite cases with pro per litigants; and
- 88% reported that the Family Law Information Centers save courtroom time.

All were aware of the Family Law Information Centers and made referrals to the Centers on a frequent and regular basis. Some commented that they did not know how they had gotten along before without the services of the Family Law Information Centers.

- 88% reported that the centers help litigants provide correct paperwork to the court;

### CUSTOMERS EXPRESS THEIR GRATITUDE FOR THE HELP THEY RECEIVED:

*"This is excellent service. . .  
. I want to say thank you  
very much."*

*"I really appreciate the  
much needed service."*

*"I really want to thank the  
staff for all the great help  
they gave me."*

*"Thanks a lot . . . without  
the help of the staff I  
wouldn't know what to do."*

*"This helps a lot when you  
don't know what to do. So  
thank you very much."*

*"The Center has helped me  
since day one. I am very  
thankful."*

*"The process here was very  
smooth. Thank you very  
much for your help."*

*"I believe and know that  
everyone one of you are  
outstanding. Thank you."*

- 75% said they believe that the centers help the litigants become better prepared for court; and
- 67% said they believe that the centers help people understand how the law and court procedures are being applied in their cases

The fact that the Family Law Information Centers answer questions for litigants and help them to provide correct paperwork to the court are of enormous benefit to judges.

Judges believe that the Family Law Information Centers should be funded to expand existing services and extend to other services that would expedite pro per cases. Examples include the following:

- Staff in courtrooms;
- Case management and coordination; status conferences;
- Readiness file reviews prior to hearings; and
- Expansion of the types of cases served.

Judges also point out that litigants benefit from their interaction with the Family Law Information Center staff with the result that they feel more fairly treated by the court.

#### **FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS**

The experience of the three pilot Family Law Information Centers has clearly established the need for such programs, both to serve the public and to expedite court processes.

Family Law Information Center customers indicate that they have gained a better understanding of their cases and feel better prepared to present their cases to the court. This perception is shared by judges, who believe that the services received by litigants at the Family Law Information Centers saves valuable courtroom time and expedites the case process overall. Correct paperwork, better understanding by litigants about their particular cases, and more clarity about court processes as a whole contribute to the benefits for the court.

Based on the evaluation of the three Family Law Information Center pilot programs, we conclude the following:

1. The three Family Law Information Centers have clearly met the criteria set out in Family Code

section 15010(k) and are found to be successful in the mission set for them by the Legislature.

2. The evaluation data suggest that the Family Law Information Centers serve to reduce costs for the courts in processing pro per family law cases. This aspect should be studied in more detail, and consideration given to expanding the Family Law Information Centers as a method of cost savings for the courts.
3. Data suggest that funding for the Family Law Information Centers should be sufficient to allow adequate staffing to provide direct assistance with forms preparation, and document review.
4. Subject matter workshops are an efficient method of providing assistance with forms preparation.
5. Telephone help-line assistance is effective in increasing access for those who cannot get to the courthouse during business hours.
6. Timely scheduled appointments can increase customer satisfaction with respect to time spent at the Family Law Information Centers.
7. Further study should be conducted to determine whether courtroom and/or financial mediation services for pro per litigants might further expedite case processing in family law cases.

Judges believe that interaction with the Family Law Information Centers increases the trust and confidence of the public in the court. Comments from the customers seem to bear this out.

These judges emphasize that the family law courts are distinguished by the huge percentage of pro per litigants, and that the development of optimal court management systems for cases in which pro pers are the norm requires creative solutions. They believe that the Family Law Information Centers are a core function of the modern family law court. ■